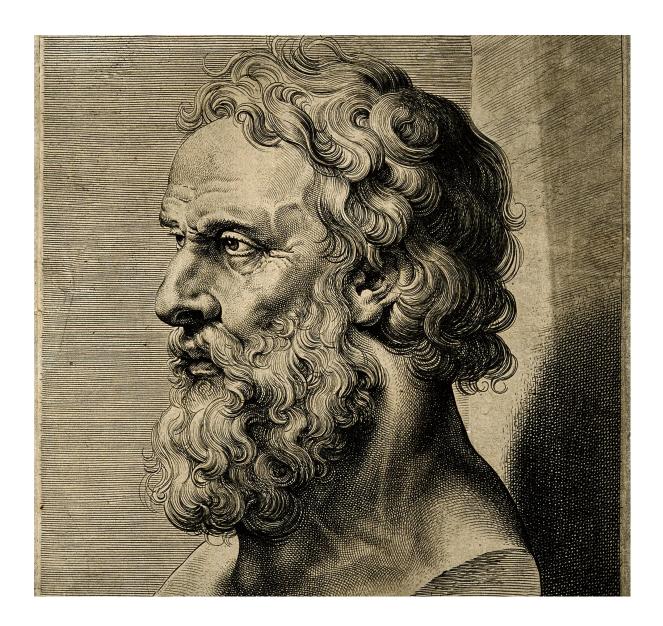
A Primer on Plato: His Life, Works, and Philosophy

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Introduction



From antiquity to the modern day, society has been having a "Great Conversation" about the big ideas of life.

What is love? What is courage? Does Truth exist? If so, how do you access it?

You can find attempts at answering these questions throughout the great

works of Western philosophy, theology, and literature.

Every conversation has a person who breaks the ice and starts the discussion, and the Great Conversation in the West is no different.

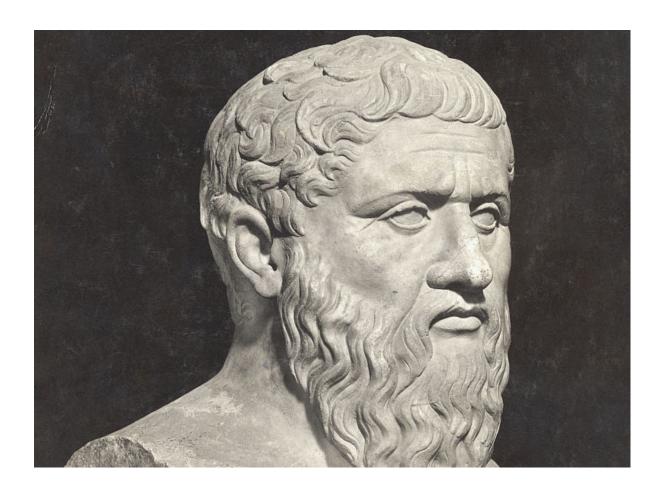
Its initiator was Plato: Ancient Greek. Student of Socrates. Founder of the Academy of Athens. Primogenitor of Western culture.

As Alfred Whitehead put it so succinctly, all philosophy -- all Western thought -- is just "a footnote to Plato."

Many of the big questions that we're still grappling with today originated with Plato. And these lines of inquiry concern not just the ethical and political, but even questions cosmologists and physicists are still trying to figure out, like the nature of reality. Over 2,000 years ago, Plato was plumbing those very same issues.

Thus, to understand the world today, every modern citizen needs to have a basic understanding of this man who lived a couple millennia back. For that reason, we offer this relatively short, accessible primer on Plato and his philosophy. While it is not exhaustive by design, it will allow those not familiar with him to gain a basic grasp of his big ideas, and enable them to better engage in the Great Conversation as it continues to unfold.

The Life of Plato



The Political Background of Plato's Youth

To understand Plato's philosophy, it helps to understand his upbringing. Plato was born around 428/427 BC and entered a world in tumult. During the several years previous to his birth, a plague ravaged Athens, killing one-third of the population, including the great Athenian statesman and general, Pericles. Around the same time, Athens and Sparta began the Peloponnesian War, which was waged until 404 BC. All of Plato's childhood and early adulthood passed under the shadow of this war, and it's likely that Plato himself served as a cavalryman in one of its last battles.

Plato not only grew up witnessing the conflict between these two city-states,

but also had a front row seat to the strife that roiled the citizens in his own backyard. The dual scourges of war and disease destabilized an already chaotic Athens, leading to endless political power struggles, some of which involved his closest kin.

Plato's family and relatives were aristocrats and held prominent positions in the Athenian government. Being part of the powerful upper crust, they were suspicious of democracy, particularly the radical form of it encouraged by Pericles. In fact, Plato's father

was a member of the oligarchic Council of 300 that, after the Athenians' defeat at Sicily, overthrew the radically democratic assembly that was in power at the time.

So too, Plato's great uncle, Critias, was a member of the Thirty Tyrants, an Athenian puppet government set up by Sparta after they finally emerged victorious from the Peloponnesian War. While Plato had high hopes that the Thirty Tyrants would restore stability, rationality, and intelligence to Athens, his hopes were dashed. During their reign, the Tyrants, led by Critias, went on the warpath, executing and exiling Athenian citizens who expressed pro-democratic sentiments or who simply weren't loyal enough to the oligarchic regime.

Supporters of democracy fled Athens and marshaled together an army to overthrow the Thirty Tyrants. The coup was successful, and democracy was restored to Athens in 403 BC. The first democratic government was relatively moderate. However, the subsequent government was radically democratic -- to the point of chaos. In 399 BC, under pressure from the citizens of Athens, who were looking for a scapegoat for their defeat to Sparta, the government executed Plato's teacher, Socrates, under trumped up charges.

The fact that Plato grew up during a time when democracy seemed connected to so much tumult and disorder permanently turned him away from that form of government, as well as his plans to follow in his family's footsteps in becoming a politician. Instead, he decided to become a philosopher, exploring questions on what might constitute a better form of government, and many other subjects as well.

The Backdrop of Plato's Education and Philosophy

It wasn't just government and society that were in turmoil during Plato's youth; the world of philosophy was in flux as well.

Before Plato's time, Greek philosophy had been extremely speculative in regards to the nature of the universe. In the century before his birth, philosophers and physicists on the island of Ionia began creating a cosmology based not on myth and religion, but grounded in materialism and observation. These pre-Socratic philosophers developed a primitive form of atomic theory that posited that all objects in nature are made of tiny particles that are constantly in flux. Instead of the sun being a mystical object pulled by Apollo's chariot, the Ionian physicists argued that it was merely a hot rock out in space. This more rational and materialist view of the universe fundamentally changed how Greeks approached morality and philosophy. If the world was constantly in flux, then why couldn't morality change as well? Perhaps there was no such thing as absolute Truth to guide the conduct of a person or culture.

During Plato's life, this line of thinking was taken up by a group called the Sophists. While they considered themselves philosophers, others viewed them as charlatans whose sole focus was teaching young men how to use rhetoric to win arguments and increase their political power. For the sophists, moral truth was relative. You could make any argument "true" as long as you used the right rhetorical technique. Critics felt this moral relativism based on the relativism of nature was a recipe for the corruption of character and political anarchy.



One of the main antagonists of the sophists was an enigmatic philosopher by the name of Socrates, who Plato began following sometime during his youth. Plato, along with other young men, hung around with Socrates in the agora or near the gymnasium, and eagerly took part in dialectic -- question and answer sessions -- about the nature of beauty, justice, and the good. Though the exact nature of Plato's relationship with Socrates is unknown, Socrates would profoundly influence the former's writing. In fact, in his "Socratic" dialogues, Plato would use Socrates as the mouthpiece for his own philosophic ideas.

In addition to Socrates, Plato's early philosophical development was influenced by the education he received as a child and young man which was steeped in the esoteric and math-based theories of Pythagoras. Many of Plato's most influential ideas can be directly attributed to Pythagoras, such as the immortality of the soul and its reincarnation, and the primacy of math and abstraction in guiding humans to pure truth.

Beyond the teachings of Socrates and Pythagoras, the last piece of Plato's main philosophic influences arose from his travels.

Travels, Writing, and the Academy

After the execution of his mentor, Plato left Athens and traveled to Italy, Sicily, Egypt, and Cyrene. It was during his time abroad that he began writing, starting with his famous *Apology*.

In Egypt, Plato found inspiration for his ideal government -- one that is so well-ordered it will remain unchanged for millennia -- and aspects of Egyptian political life would influence his *Republic* and *Laws*. His very personal brush with the danger of tyranny would influence his future writing as well; while in Sicily, Dionysus I, the despotic ruler of Syracuse, threatened to kill him. Plato escaped death but was sold into slavery. Thankfully, a friendly chap by the name of Anniceris bought Plato's freedom and sent him home to Athens.

After returning to Greece, Plato founded one of civilization's earliest institutions of higher learning: the Academy. Built outside the walls of Athens in the mid-380s BC, the Academy was an exclusive organization where philosophers, scientists, and thinkers of all kinds pondered and argued about the nature of the universe and moral truth. Despite the name, the Academy was not a school in the sense of there being formal lectures and

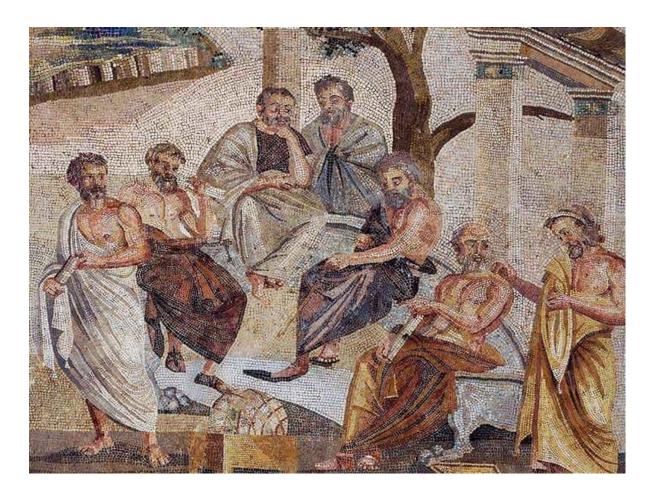
curricula, and a strict line between teachers and students (though there was a distinction between junior and senior members). Rather, it was a place where men (and a couple of exceptional women) could gather to engage in dialectic. While Plato oversaw the Academy, he continued to write, his most famous work from this period being the *Republic*.

At the age the 60, at the behest of his friend Dion, he traveled back to Syracuse to tutor Dion's nephew, King Dionysius II (the son of the Dionysus that sold Plato into slavery). Plato and Dion hoped they could turn Dionysus II into the kind of "philosopher king" Plato described in the *Republic*. As it turned out, while Dionysus liked Plato's teachings well enough, he thought his uncle Dion had his own designs on the throne. So, the king exiled his uncle and kept Plato in Syracuse against his will. The philosopher was eventually able to make it back to Athens.

Plato spent the rest of his life writing and teaching in the Academy. When he was about 61, his most famous student joined the school -- a young 18-year-old buck by the name of Aristotle.

Plato lived to the ripe old age of 80 and supposedly died peacefully in his sleep.

Plato's Works



Plato's writing output during his lifetime was prodigious. Thirty-five of his dialogues plus a few letters survive today. Besides elucidating big philosophic ideas that Western thinkers would grapple with for millennia to come, Plato's writing is surprisingly beautiful and even poetic. His use of symbolism and poetic symmetry are unmatched in philosophic writing. Like a good novel, you can read the works of Plato several times during your life and uncover a new insight or symbol each time.

Philosophers break Plato's writing down into three periods: Early, Middle, and Late. Knowing when Plato wrote a particular piece allows the reader to see the development of Plato's philosophical thought and how the treatises interrelate.

Early Period

These works are from the period immediately after the death of Socrates and during Plato's travels abroad. They include the following:

- Apology
- Crito
- Laches
- Ion
- Euthyphro
- Hippias Minor
- Protagoras
- Gorgias
- Euthydemus
- Hippias Major
- Lysis
- Menexenus

The general theme of these early dialogues is ethics. Plato scholars also often categorize these dialogues as *aporic*, meaning no decisive conclusion is reached as to the questions raised. As you read these early aporic dialogues, you might find yourself getting frustrated at Socrates (and, consequently, Plato) because after all the back and forth between Socrates and his interlocutors, they aren't seemingly any closer to arriving at an answer than they were at the beginning. This is by design; Plato wants the reader to be a little flummoxed -- he disorients in order to re-orient.

Middle Period

These are works beginning at Plato's founding of the Academy. They include the following:

- Meno
- Phaedo
- Symposium
- Republic
- Parmenides
- Theaetetus

The main themes of Plato's Middle Period are moral order, epistemology, and ontology (the nature of existence and being). While Plato utilizes aporia and dialectic during his Middle Period, he begins to be more dogmatic and didactic about his ideas. For example, in the *Republic*, Plato clearly lays out his vision as to the ideal forms of morality and government. Instead of a dialogue, it's more of a lecture. There's no question about what Plato thinks at the end.

Besides being more explicit with his ideas, Plato's writing during the Middle Period becomes much more dramatic and even poetic. In the place of dialogue, Plato utilizes a poetic form similar to Greek mythology and stories. The *Republic* is the best example of the substitution of this stylistic form.

Late Period

These are the works produced in the last twenty or so years of Plato's life. They include:

- Timaeus
- Critias
- Sophist
- Statesman
- Philebus
- Laws

In the Late Period of Plato's philosophical writing, he revisits and even begins to critique his earlier ideas -- his Theory of the Forms (more on what this is later) being the primary target of this retroactive reconsideration. For example, while in the *Republic*, Plato argues that understanding the Forms (the eternal, unchangeable essences of all things and ideas) is necessary for understanding how to govern a state correctly, in his *Laws*, he doesn't mention the Forms at all. Plato seems to make a shift from idealistic abstraction to figuring out how to work with what you've got to create a harmonious society.

Plato's works from his Late Period also evince another shift in style. Instead of being poetic and dramatic, like the works from his Middle Period, Plato's later works are much more analytic and straightforward. Socrates also fades into the background. Instead of being the primary voice for Plato's ideas, Socrates is relegated to a cameo role.

Is Plato or Socrates Speaking?

While Socrates is a minor figure in Plato's later works, in most of his writings, the philosopher serves as the main protagonist. Reading Plato's dialogues, one feels that they are transcriptions of actual conversations Socrates had with the citizens of Athens.

Thus an important question to ask while reading Plato's Socratic dialogues is "Who is speaking?" Is it Socrates or Plato?

It's a tough question to answer.

Virtually the only sources we have of Socrates' philosophy are Plato and a contemporary writer named Xenophon. For example, we don't know if Socrates taught the Theory of the Forms or not. He may have. Or Plato may have decided to put his own words into Socrates' mouth. We just don't know.

Most scholars believe, however, that the ideas conveyed by Socrates in Plato's dialogues are most likely Plato's own. With that said, a reader of Plato's Socratic dialogues must be careful not to assume that *everything* Socrates says is what Plato believes. Sometimes Plato uses Socrates to convey ideas he *disagrees* with. For example, in *Protagoras*, Socrates takes part in an absurd poetic exegesis that borders on the fallacious. For a straight shooter like Plato, that sort of argument would be unseemly.

While we don't have sources other than Plato and Xenophon to confirm the *content* of Socrates' philosophy, there are other sources which confirm its *style*: it almost assuredly took the form of the dialectic, or what's known as the Socratic dialogue.

All of this is to say, that while Plato primarily uses Socrates as the mouthpiece for his own ideas, he does accurately capture the way Socrates taught and discussed the art of philosophy.

Themes to Look For While Reading Plato

While Plato was big on logic, he was a masterful writer who utilized literary and poetic symbolism to convey his ideas. His dialogues are not just works of philosophy but also works of art.

There are a few recurring themes or symbols that you'll discover while reading Plato. When they pop up, pay particular attention, because he is

often making an important point when he uses them.

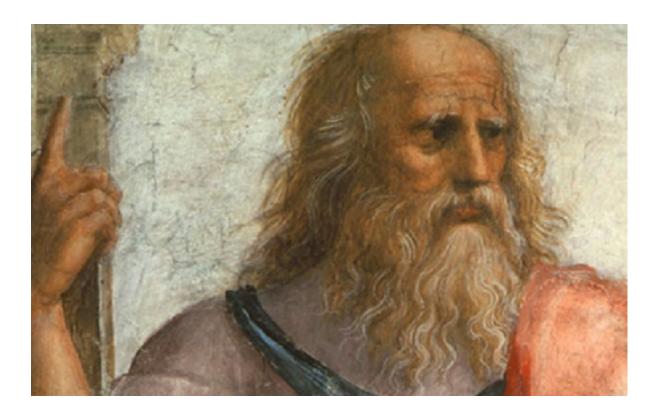
Math. As a student of Pythagoras, Plato saw math as a divine and pure language. It's the language of his ethereal Forms. So, whenever you see anything to do with geometry, math, or numbers, pay attention.

Travel. Plato scholar Michael Sugrue argues that Plato use his dialogues to try to make Socrates a "new Odysseus." Instead of traveling around the world, slaying one-eyed monsters to get back to his earthly home like the Homeric hero, Socrates is going on an intellectual journey back to his spiritual home amongst the Forms. Therefore, pay heed to traveling motifs in Plato's dialogues, even if it's just Socrates taking a walk; it often represents more than just physically moving from Point A to Point B.

Sun. Plato was a lover of logic. Apollo is the Greek god of logic, and also the sun god. So, when you see the sun mentioned in his dialogues, take note. For example, the sun takes on important significance in Plato's Allegory of the Cave in the *Republic*.

Besides looking for these big themes and symbols, pay attention to the person with whom Socrates is engaging in dialogue. Plato picked the people he did for a reason. They typically represent an idea that Plato was trying to prove wrong. These "background checks" will require doing some reading on the individual -- Wikipedia is your friend here.

Plato's Big Ideas



Plato covered a lot of philosophical ground during his life. To summarize all of his ideas would require an entire book. My goal with this section is to hit on Plato's big ideas so that a beginning student can have a good grasp of what Plato was all about, see how his philosophy continues to influence Western culture today, and, hopefully, be inspired to dig deeper into his work.

The Tripartite Nature of the Soul

Because so much of Plato's philosophy grows out of his view of the nature of the human soul, let's start off by unpacking his thoughts in that realm.

Plato believed that the human soul was immortal; it existed before this mortal life, and will exist after this earthly sojourn is through. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato goes into explicit detail about this belief. He theorizes that before humans were born, their souls lived in a preexistence among the perfect and pure Forms -- the essences of things like Beauty, Wisdom,

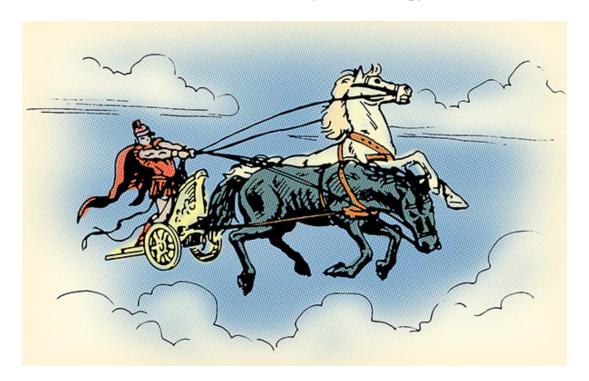
Courage, Justice, and

Goodness (we'll talk more about the Forms below). In the presence of these Forms, human souls had a complete understanding of all everlasting Truth.

However, when people are born, a veil covers their minds, and they forget the perfect knowledge they formerly possessed. Lacking memory of what virtue looks like, mortal humans consequently devolve into debauchery and baseness.

And yet part of them still longs to recover their forgotten knowledge, remember the Forms they once knew, and return to the realm of Truth.

This virtue-seeking part of the soul coexists with two other parts: desire and reason. To explain this tripartite view of the human soul, in the *Phaedrus* Plato constructs his beautiful and often lyrical Analogy of the Chariot.



He compares the soul to a chariot being pulled by two winged horses: a mortal dark horse and an immortal white one. The dark horse is deformed and obstinate while the white horse is noble and game. The charioteer strives to get these two equines to work together in pulling his chariot into the heavens where the Forms exist -- a difficult task, as the white horse wants to soar, while the dark horse seeks to pull the chariot back to earth.

As the horses pull in opposing directions, and the charioteer attempts to get them into sync, his chariot bobs above the ridge of heaven then down again; with effort, the charioteer is able to catch glimpses of the great beyond on his ascents before sinking once more.

If the charioteer is able to behold the Forms, he gets to go on another revolution around the heavens. But if he cannot successfully pilot the chariot, the horses' wings wither from lack of nourishment, or break off when the horses collide and attack each other, or crash into the chariots of others. The chariot then plummets to earth, the horses lose their wings, and the soul becomes embodied in human flesh. The degree to which the soul falls, and the "rank" of the mortal being it must then be embodied in is based on the amount of Truth it beheld while in the heavens. The degree of the fall also determines how long it takes for the horses to regrow their wings and once again take flight. Basically, the more Truth the charioteer beheld on his journey, the shallower his fall, and the easier it is for him to get up and get going again.

The Analogy of the Chariot represents what Plato saw as the three competing drives and capacities within the human soul, as well what the *telos* -- or purpose -- of life is.

The charioteer represents the soul's capacity for reason, the white horse its noble and thumotic drive, and the dark horse its base and worldly appetites. Just as the charioteer's job is to guide and direct the horses towards the Forms, our job as humans is to use our reason to direct our worthy ambitions and keep a rein on our fleshy appetites as we seek perfect knowledge. We must obtain harmony between the three parts of our psyches -- reason, spirit, and desire -- if we wish to succeed in this endeavor.

By seeking knowledge, a man can remember what he once knew when he floated amongst the Forms during his premortal existence. The more Truth he uncovers, the more his "wings" are nourished, the more metaphorical trips he can make into the heavens, and the more he progresses along the continuum of human flourishing, which culminates in becoming -- surprise, surprise -- a philosopher. And if people don't seek or have access to the experiences they need to re-learn forgotten Truth? No worries. Plato believed they'd be reincarnated and get another go at it.

Some historians and philosophers speculate that Plato's belief in the tripartite soul and in reincarnation was transmitted to him from the Vedic religions in India by way of Pythagoras. However he arrived at this theory, it represents one of the West's first forays into psychology, and undoubtedly influenced

how modern psychologists think about the psyche. For example, Freud's theory of id, ego, and superego roughly lines up with the tripartite model of the soul Plato posited two thousand years prior.

Theory of the Forms

For Plato, the ultimate *telos* of human beings was to understand the Forms, and his concept of them informed many, if not all, of his ideas about ethics, knowledge, politics, and psychology. But what *are* the Forms exactly?

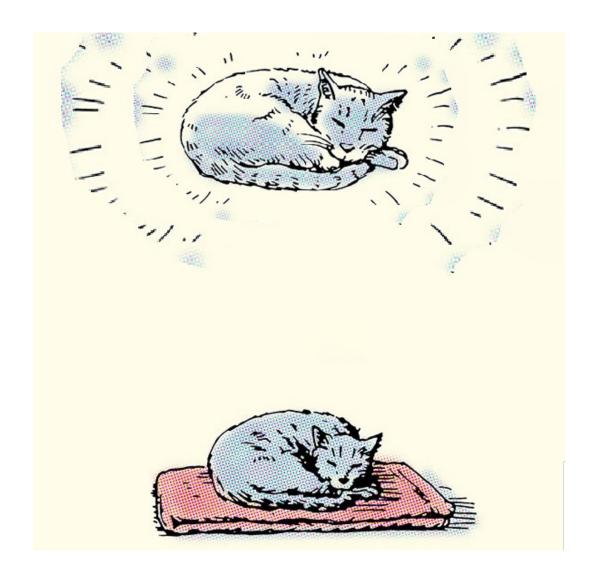
There isn't a single dialogue where Plato directly explains his Theory of the Forms. He mentions it here and there throughout his works (but primarily in *Phaedo* and *Republic*), and he refined it as the years went by. So, completely understanding the Theory of the Forms requires reading all of Plato's works and piecing together the fragments.

Here's the *Reader's Digest* version of what you get when you assemble those pieces.

For Plato, reality exists in two realms. The first is the physical world -- the world we can observe with our physical senses. The second is the realm of the Forms.

The physical world is constantly changing. People die, buildings crumble, leaves fall. What's more, our subjective senses can lead our observations of the world astray. You might see the same object another person does, but think it's something else. With all this change and uncertainty, how do you know what is real? The answer for Plato is that you can't know about reality just by observing the physical world. Instead, you have to look to the heavens to where the Forms exist.

In this eternal realm, Forms exist for every single object or abstract idea in the physical world. The Forms are the pure and perfect essences of everything we see here on earth. According to Plato, there's a Form of a Triangle sitting up there in heaven that any and all other triangle-shaped objects here on earth approximate. We can say that an object looks like a triangle because there's a Form of the Triangle out there -- somewhere. Also, it's because our immortal souls saw this Form before we were born, that we can recognize when we encounter triangle-like objects here on earth.



The same goes for chairs, women, cats…everything you can think of. Up in the realm of the Forms exists a perfect Form of a chair, a woman, a cat, etc. A chair is a chair because it approximates the Form of a Chair. And it doesn't matter what kind of chair it is. It can be a black chair, a leather chair, a chair with no back, a chair with no armrests, etc. Because said chair approximates the Form of a Chair, it's a chair.

The Forms don't just exist for everyday objects, either, but also for ideas like beauty, courage, and justice as well. How do we know something is beautiful? Well, because it approximates or comes close to the Form of Beauty. How do we know an act is just? Because it approximates the Form of Justice. (If you've ever wondered why things like Truth, Justice, and Beauty are often capitalized when someone is talking about Greek, and particularly Platonic philosophy, or are simply referring to the very pinnacle of a virtue, now you know; what's being talked about isn't just truth, but *the* Truth -- the perfect Form all other truths merely model.)

While the Forms are independent, they line up in a hierarchy in which the ultimate Form is the Form of the Good, symbolized by the sun.

How does Plato know the Forms exist? Well, for most of the dialogues, he just takes their existence for granted. It's an act of faith. However, he does attempt now and then to prove the existence of the Forms. He does so in the *Meno* when Socrates teaches an illiterate slave a complex geometric problem. According to Socrates, the reason this slave was able to pick up the concept so quickly was that he was only recollecting the Forms of Squares and Geometry he had already seen before he was born; he wasn't learning something anew, but rather *relearning* it. However, this argument isn't very strong. If you read the exchange carefully, Socrates just asks the slave a bunch of leading questions that would naturally result in the slave giving the right answer.

Besides the fact that the existence of Forms can't be proven, the Theory of Forms has other problems that even Plato recognized and acknowledged during his lifetime. He discusses the main issues in the *Parmenides*. The first that Plato tackles is figuring out the relationship between a Form and the particular object that approximates a Form. Take the example of chairs. The Forms, Plato says, are indivisible and one (there are no sub-forms or variations), so how is it that all the different types of chairs on Earth can be said to look like the Form of a Chair?

The other issue is that of limits. Tons of different objects and ideas exist on earth, and they mix. For example, there are black leather chairs. Under the Theory of Forms, there's a Form of a Chair, a Form of Black, and a Form of Leather. Do these Forms combine to create a black leather chair on earth? Or is there a Form of a Black, Leather Chair that the physical black leather chair approximates?

You can keep adding to that, ad infinitum. There's a black, leather chair without any arm rests, and a dog is sitting on it. Up in the heavens, is there a Form of a Black, Leather Chair Without Any Armrests With a Dog Sitting on It?

By the latter part of his life, Plato knew that his Theory of Forms was on shaky ground, and he made an earnest, but fairly convoluted attempt to respond to his self-criticism in the *Sophist*. Plato introduces five categories to explain the existence of objects in reality: being, sameness, difference, change, and unchangingness. His categories appear to be a subset of the

Forms -- an alternative almost. However, by providing this alternative to the Theory of Forms, Plato undercuts the epistemological, ethical, and political arguments he made in other dialogues that were based on his original theory. Recognizing these weaknesses, he doesn't even mention the Forms in the last dialogue he writes, the *Laws*.

Even though Plato's Theory of the Forms has its issues, its compelling complexities and intriguing perspective on the nature of existence succeeded in opening up the debate in philosophy about the nature of reality -- a debate that continues today. For example, some philosophers and cosmologists argue that our universe may in fact just be a hologram or perhaps a virtual reality created by super-intelligent aliens. In short, the reality we experience might not be reality, and there may be a super-reality existing outside what we can currently perceive. It's partly due to Plato's Theory of the Forms that philosophers are even having this debate.

The Examined Life

Now that you understand Plato's conception of the human soul, and his Theory of the Forms, you'll understand why he spent so many of his dialogues discussing the nature of things like justice, courage, beauty, and love.

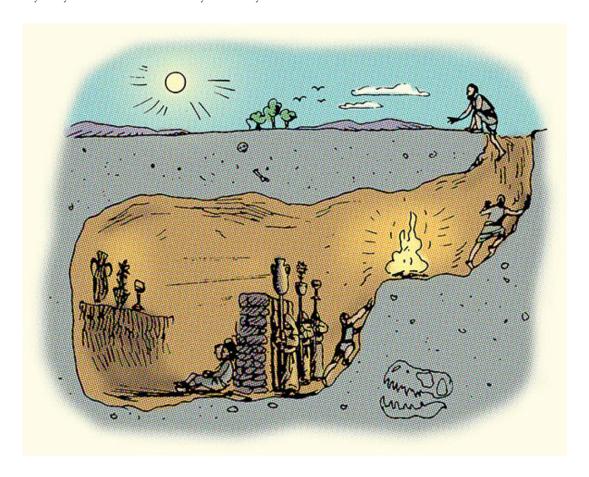
If human souls once lived among the Forms, but have now forgotten them, and the whole goal in life is to rediscover what you once knew, then the best way to spend one's mortal life is by digging into the very essence of the Good.

For Plato, this pursuit of knowledge was not only how you became wise, but also how you became virtuous. In fact, he would say that virtue *is* knowledge. To be virtuous requires knowing what virtue is in the first place. Once a man *really* understands something like courage, Plato argues, he'll naturally start doing courageous things.

This big idea is made explicit in *Meno*. In it, Socrates takes part in a dialogue with a sophist about the nature of virtue and whether it can be taught. While Socrates isn't able to get a clear answer to these questions by the end of the dialogue, he hints that he thinks virtue *can* be learned and is thus a type of knowledge that requires study and reflection.

Unfortunately, Plato observes, very few people take the time to engage in

this kind of contemplation. They're too caught up in worldly affairs to seek the eternal, the abstract, and the pure. They mistake the reality of their everyday lives for the only reality that exists.



The limited perspective with which most people experience the world is illustrated in the *Republic* through Plato's famous Allegory of the Cave. The dialogue begins with Socrates describing a cave inhabited with prisoners chained to a wall. Behind the wall a fire burns. The prisoner's heads are forced to look at the wall in front of them where they see images of what appear to be animals and men. But the images are in fact just shadows of things people are carrying on their heads behind the wall to which they are chained. The prisoners, however, don't know the shadows they're seeing are fabricated to look like different objects -- they don't even know they're looking at shadows at all. They think they're looking at the real thing. This, Socrates says, is the state that humans find themselves in when they rely solely on their sensory perceptions of the physical world.

Socrates asks what a prisoner's response would be if he were drug from the dark cave and into the sunlight. He answers that the light from the sun would be blinding, so "he will not be able to see anything at all."

For Plato, the world outside the cave in the light of the real sun represents the realm of the Forms. It is reality as it really is.

Most people don't know they're living in a cave; they live an "unexamined life," which Socrates famously said, "is not worth living." They lead what Plato calls an "active" life rather than a "contemplative" life, choosing to engage with earthly responsibilities, instead of seeking Truth.

The proper balance between action and contemplation is a question philosophers have been wrestling with ever since antiquity. But for Plato, there was no debate: the contemplative life -- the life of the soul -- is the most important thing to which a man can dedicate himself. In fact, he thought a man should hold fast to the life of the mind and the integrity of Truth, even if that meant choosing death over capitulation, as Socrates did. For what was the point, Plato thought, of preserving one's life, if that life was spent groping through a world of shadow and illusion? Were you not in a way dead already?

Emerging from the cave requires living a contemplative, examined life -- seeking knowledge, humbly probing one's assumptions, thinking hard, and wrestling with questions both big and small. It doesn't even matter if you get answers to your questions; the important thing for Plato is that you decide to grapple with them at all.

This process of working through questions wasn't just an introspective, solo affair either, and the contemplative life wasn't as passive as the name might suggest. For it also involved exchanging questions with others -- engaging in dialectic.

The Rejection of Sophistry & The Power of Dialectic

Plato's biggest contribution to philosophy arguably wasn't his content but rather his style and approach to it.

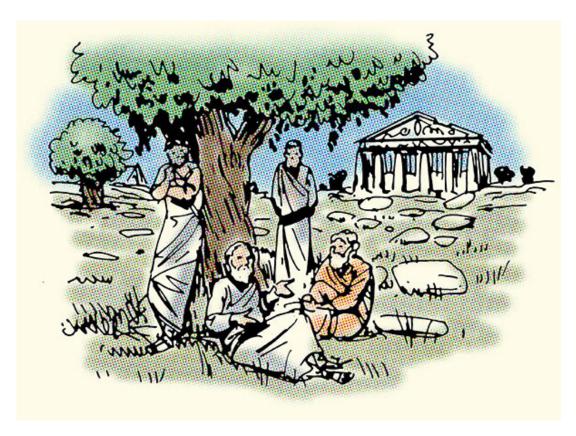
The popular rhetorical style in Athens at the time was Sophistry. The city-state was a loud place in Plato's time, and there were all sorts of groups fighting for Athenians' attention. Sophists grabbed that attention by engaging in direct debates and using rhetoric that entertained and excited listeners' emotions. The sophists were willing to sell tutoring in these techniques for money, and their services found many takers -- especially among the noble class. As citizens of a burgeoning democracy, the ability to

persuade and win the minds of their fellow men was essential for entering public life, and winning the rewards of wealth, influence, and political power.

To their critics, however, sophists cared more about *appearing* right than *being* right. The truth mattered less than one's ability to create a persuasive argument. Critics accused the sophists of using reasoning that was fallacious, manipulative, and deceitful -- of offering confusing, contradictory, arguments that *sounded* intelligent but weren't. The sophists were arguably the original bullshitters -- the dumb person's idea of a smart person.

Plato was among these critics, and his dialogues showcase many showdowns between Socrates and these rhetoricians. Having seen firsthand the upheaval a skilled, and corrupt, orator can cause in a democratic government, believing in Truth with a capital T, and contemptuous of the idea of selling wisdom for money, Plato saw Sophistry as the tool of demagogues and incompatible with the aims of an ideal government and the pursuit of the Good life.

He argued that dialectic, or dialogue, was the superior way for citizens and wise statesmen alike to exchange ideas and pursue truth.



Dialectic may seem similar to debating, but the two approaches are actually very different. In debating, the communication is direct and the goal is to

win. In dialectic, the goal is to uncover the truth, and the process is gone about in a more indirect way.

Remember that Plato believed that humans once knew all Truth, but had forgotten it, so that the acquisition of knowledge consisted not of learning, but remembering. The goal of dialectic then is not to fill people's head with information, but to foster insights and facilitate the remembrance of this lost knowledge. It's not about winning, but discovery.

Through the exchange of questions, dialectic helps participants uncover the Truth. Interlocutors thoughtfully pose big questions, and then patiently break them down into smaller and smaller ones. Respondents work to answer these questions in a logically coherent manner. Question after question removes layer after layer of ignorance.

The precision that dialectic demands allows no room for fudging, covering your ignorance with flowery language, or using emotion to persuade. Plato thought you should have a Vulcan-like distance from emotions when it came to the cognitive process, and base your arguments and decisions on reason alone. If you can't clearly, plainly, and logically articulate a reply to a question, then Plato would argue you don't really know what you're talking about.

Through dialectic, you find out that the thoughts that made so much sense in your head, don't actually make sense when you try to articulate them. When the sophists Socrates engages in dialogue with hit this wall in their understanding, and tangle themselves up in knots of fallacious reasoning, they sometimes quit the discussion altogether in frustration.

But those who are patient and humble can appreciate the dialogue, even when it shows them what they don't know. For Socrates, arriving at total humility was really the whole point of dialectic. It was knowing that you didn't know, that made you wise. In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates says, "I am wiser than this man, for neither of us appears to know anything great and good; but he fancies he knows something, although he knows nothing; whereas I, as I do not know anything, so I do not fancy I do. In this trifling particular, then, I appear to be wiser than he, because I do not fancy I know what I do not know."

Engaging in dialectic thus requires that you abandon all preconceived notions you might have and be open to the fact that you may be wrong. You

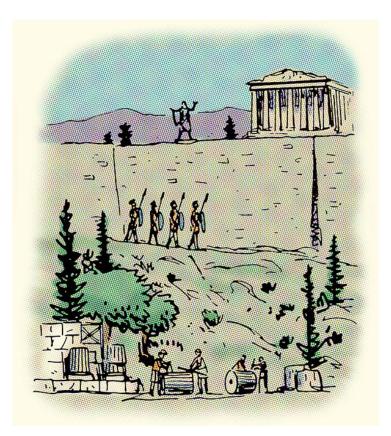
can't get attached to an idea or an opinion. You just keep drilling down past your pet notions, as you attempt to get to the essence of Truth.

Platonic dialectic, what's often called the "Socratic method," continues to be used in some university classrooms, and can be a tool for approaching all of life's questions. As Platonic expert Michael Sugrue argues in his class "Plato, Socrates, and the Dialogues," dialectic is a tool of meta-learning that can be applied to any and all domains. It's thinking about how to think so that you can think better.

Utopianism - Republic & Laws

Despite the fact that Plato was turned off from actively getting involved in politics due to his upbringing (or perhaps because of it), he spent a lot of time thinking about what an ideal political structure would look like. And he put words to this vision in his *Republic*.

In the *Republic*, Plato-via-Socrates lays out his vision for the ideal city-state, by comparing the well-governed city to the well-governed soul.



Socrates divides his ideal city into three classes, which each corresponds to a part of his tripartite view of the soul: Guardians (philosopher-kings who represent reason), Auxiliaries (warriors who represent spirit/thumos), and

Producers (tradesmen who represent desire). Just as each part of the human soul has certain qualities that need to be directed in certain ways, the members of each of these classes are to possess particular virtues that would need to be harnessed through a particular education and lifestyle in order to fulfill their *telos* -- their purpose.

The Guardians, who will rule the city, would be schooled in wisdom and spend time contemplating the Forms through dialectic so that they could make wise decisions on behalf of their people. The Auxiliaries, who will protect the city, would be trained in gymnastics to strengthen their bodies for warfare, as well as music to soften their naturally thumotic spirits, thereby giving balance to their souls. The Producers would be the city's blue-collar and commercial class, and would be educated in a trade, as well as in moderation and justice, so that they didn't overstep their bounds in the system. Just as a perfect soul will have unity between its three parts, Socrates explains, so will the perfect city have unity amongst its three classes.

To ensure that the city had the right individuals to fill each role, Socrates argues that reproduction should be regulated and directed by the state: Guardians will mate with Guardians, Auxiliaries with Auxiliaries, and Producers with Producers. What follows from this requirement that like-partner-with-like, is a little proto-feminist thinking from Plato. For women would have to be trained in the same sorts of things as their male counterparts. For an Auxiliary man to partner with an Auxiliary woman, for example, the woman would need to receive the same kind of warrior training as her mate, and likewise nurture her *thumos*. This idea was quite unique for the time, as most other Greek philosophers thought women not only lacked *thumos* as part of their soul, but didn't even have a soul to begin with.

To ensure individuals were effectively trained for their future roles, and further solidify their allegiance to the city, children are to be taken from their biological parents and raised by the government. This reproductive arrangement is likely a nod to the Spartans. In Sparta, both boys and girls were taken from their mothers at an early age to be raised by the city-state. Some scholars argue that what Plato was trying to accomplish with the *Republic* was in fact a fusion of both Athenian and Spartan culture.

Finally, in this ideal city, poetry would be censored. Plato wasn't a fan of poetry because he thought it played too much on people's emotions and diverted their attention from the use of reason. He doesn't want to eliminate

poetry from his ideal city, he just wants poetry to reinforce the city's ideals. In fact, Plato argues that for his perfect city to begin, the poets would need to fabricate a founding myth or "noble lie" that would explain why the city needed to be divided into the three different classes in the first place.

After laying out what his ideal city would look like, Socrates analyzes the different political systems a city could adopt: aristocracy, democracy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny. Suspicious of democracy, Plato has Socrates argue for aristocracy as the superior system, as he believes a city would run best if ruled by an elite class of enlightened philosopher-kings. With individuals who pondered the eternal and unchanging Forms running his city, it would be eternal and unchanging. Plato wanted nothing to do with the democratic revolutions and endless fluctuations he had witnessed firsthand in Athens.

The problem with Plato's ideal society as laid out in the *Republic* is that it relies on the existence of the Forms. If the city is to be unchanging and perfect, the philosopher-kings in charge of governing the city need to pattern their decisions on the Forms' perfect and unchanging essences. But as we discussed above, after writing the *Republic* and getting on in years, Plato's belief in the Forms wavered. But if the Forms don't exist, then Plato's republic can't exist. What to do?

Plato provides a second-best option in his *Laws*, which was his last and longest work. It likely took him ten years to write, and it's not even finished. Instead of Socrates being the main interlocutor, it features an "Athenian Stranger" who engages in dialectic with a Spartan and Cretan about what sorts of laws a city should have.

The first question the three men discuss is where these laws should come from. According to Plato-via-the-Athenian-Stranger, they should originate from the gods. In making this argument, Plato is taking a conservative and contrarian view of the political thought of the day, which held that laws should be created according to observable phenomena in nature. These political thinkers, inspired by the Ionian materialists, believed that you had to accept humans as they are and make laws within the confines of their idiosyncrasies.

By arguing that a city's laws should come from the gods, Plato attempts to maintain some of the idealism he put forth in the *Republic*. In fact, unlike the *Republic*, in the *Laws*, Plato argues for the establishment of a state religion, a

semi-theocracy in which education, politics, and even gymnastics would have a spiritual tint to them. Systematic theology would become an important part of his city's culture.

As he does in the *Republic*, Plato argues that poetry must be censored. Poetry could be allowed to exist, but only poetry that taught virtue and goodness. The city's laws would be a kind of poetry in and of themselves, upon which citizens would be encouraged to meditate.

Education in a city governed by laws would be highly regulated and structured. Both boys and girls after the age of six would be trained in gymnastics, dance, weapons, and music. Math and astronomy would also be taught.

Besides getting extremely specific about the education and religion that a city governed by laws would have, the Athenian Stranger argues that the laws should get really particular about the size and makeup of the city. In doing so, Plato again looks to Sparta for inspiration. The goal of the laws is to create an insular and self-sufficient city much like Athens' rival.

In the Athenian Stranger's ideal city, immigration would be limited as would trade with outside states. Citizens would be divided into four classes based on wealth. While economic equality wouldn't exist, a cap would be placed on the amount of wealth members of each class could possess. The surplus would be given to the gods.

The size of the city would be limited by law to 5,040 households. (Why 5,040? It's based on the Pythagorean number of 12.) Each couple would be limited to having two children. If the city exceeded 5,040 households, a new city would be founded.

Instead of an unelected aristocracy, this law-governed city would have a semi-republican form of government in which the twelve tribes of the city would take turns each month governing it.

Both the *Republic* and the *Laws* have had a long-lasting influence on Western political thought. The debate that continues today about which type of regime is best -- democracy, oligarchy, etc. -- began with these two works.

What's more, these works introduced the idea of political and religious utopianism that influenced thinkers like Thomas Moore (*Utopia*), St.

Augustine (City of God), and Karl Marx (Communist Manifesto).

Philosophers and political thinkers since the time of Plato have also argued vehemently *against* his radical idealism and utopianism, arguing that it is often dangerous and leads to unintended consequences. One of Plato's students, Aristotle, wasn't a fan of Plato's vision, and Friedrich Nietzsche despised and blasted Plato's idealism in many of his works.

Love As the Catalyst for Self-Improvement

Plato dedicates two of his dialogues to the nature of love: Symposium and Phaedrus.

In *Symposium*, Socrates takes part in an all-night wine-drinking and discussion fest (that's what "symposium" means in Greek) with several well-known Greeks like Alcibiades and the poet Aristophanes. One by one, each in attendance gives his toast to Eros, the goddess of love.

To put *Symposium* in context, it's necessary to understand a bit about the sexual culture of ancient Greece, particularly Athens. For the Athenians, relationships between two men were superior to relationships between men and women, because women were considered to be inferior. For the same reason, sex between two men was not only normal but even considered superior to relations with women. Sex with women was more about reproduction than it was about Eros -- sensual, romantic love. Homosexual sex was so normal that the Greeks didn't even have a word for homosexual or even heterosexual. It was just assumed that normal sexuality would involve relationships with both sexes.

The most typical male-male sexual relationships existed between older men and the younger men they tutored. This was the institution of *paiderasteia*. The older man was considered the "active lover" while the younger man was the "passive lover." In ancient Greece, a man could still claim to have *andreia*, or manliness, so long as he was the active lover.

So as you read each speaker's ode to love in the *Symposium*, keep in mind that the love they're praising is love between two men and often between mentor and mentee. In fact, many who give speeches are in relationships with others in the room. Alcibiades even makes flirtatious gestures towards Socrates, which Socrates rebuffs. That being said, the principles Plato discusses can easily be applied to love relationships of all kinds.

While some of the speakers give hat tips to Eros being an ennobling desire, most of the speeches focus on the physical sensuality of love. Socrates, however, takes a different tack -- and muses on a more spiritual view of love.

He begins his speech by stating that he learned about Eros from a prophetess named Diatina. She taught Socrates that love is a *daemon*, or spirit, that fills a human soul with longing for divine perfection. Yes, sex might take place, but it's not the primary focus of love. In fact, if you make erotic sex your main goal, you miss out on its ultimate purpose. For Socrates, the purpose of Eros is to lead one's soul up into the Forms. A lover helps a man to look outside of himself, to see the world beyond his head, and if all goes well, love will slowly help him ascend the "ladder of beauty" until at last he reaches the heavens.

Plato expands on this idea of love being a driving force towards the Forms in the *Phaedrus*. Socrates uses his Analogy of the Chariot to argue that it is divine love that drives the soul, represented by the charioteer, towards the Forms. The dark horse drives the chariot towards the sexual aspect of Eros, but the beauty of the charioteer's lover reminds the charioteer of the Form of Beauty, and inspires him to rein in his base desires and point his chariot towards the heavens.

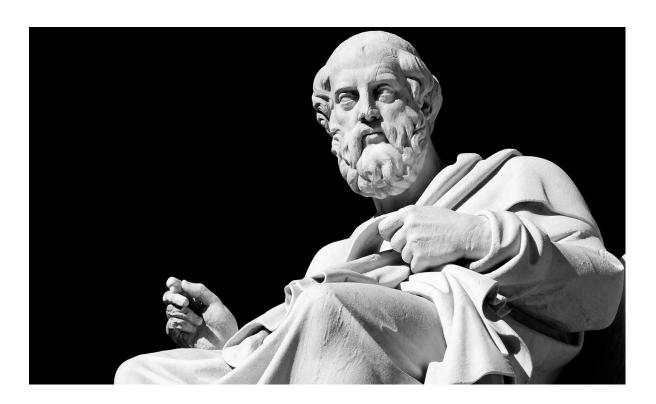
In other words, Socrates argues that sexual desire, if properly directed, can become a stepping stone to spiritual love, and this spiritual love can help a man regrow his "wings" in order to take flight into greater virtue. A lover reminds us of the Forms of Beauty and Goodness and nudges us to do all we can to bridle our carnal passions so that we might flourish and become more than we are. Thus, for Socrates, love is the force of self-improvement.

What's more, a genuine and real lover would do all that he can to help his beloved improve the state of his soul. This spiritual, non-sexual love that Plato expounds on in both the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* became known as "Platonic Love."

Plato's idea of love being the force for spiritual self-improvement and his celebration of the power of platonic friendship had a significant impact on the Western philosophical and literary canon. Judeo-Christian Platonists from St. Augustine to Finco set aside the homoerotic undercurrents in these two dialogues to postulate holier, universalized applications. Platonic love's most potent influence can be seen in the Romantic movement of the 19th century. While the Romantics emphasized emotion, imagination, and

intuition -- very un-Platonic concepts -- the main idea they espoused was that love is, as writer Mark Edmundson noted in *Self and Soul*, "a means to break through the Selfhood into another mode of being, one that can contribute to the redemption of the world." Love is then a force that cannot only transform the person within, but also without.

Conclusion



If you've never read Plato, I hope this short primer gave you a foundation to build upon and whetted your appetite to dig into his dialogues yourself. If you were already familiar with the great Athenian philosopher, I hope this was a nice refresher that motivated you to revisit him.

Despite writing over 8,500 words about Plato's ideas, I've literally just scratched the surface. There are so many themes and ideas that I skipped over, and the topics I did cover were touched upon only cursorily. I highly recommend picking up your own copies of Plato's dialogues for your personal library. You can get them used on Amazon for under a dollar. Read and re-read them. They'll help improve your thinking, and your understanding of Western culture.

In addition to reading the dialogues, I also recommend picking up a few supplementary sources to help you gain clearer insights about what you're reading. The two that I found most useful were *Understanding Plato* by David Melling and the Great Courses lecture "Plato, Socrates, and the

Dialogues" by Michael Sugrue.

Most importantly, I hope this ebook on Plato has inspired you to live the examined life. Plato's greatest contribution to philosophy is simply the idea of how vital it is to ask questions -- ideally alongside other seekers of knowledge -- about the big, fundamental ideas in life. You might not come to an answer, but you'll be a better man having gone through the exercise. Each question asked is a chance to re-grow your wings, steer your chariot into the heavens, and catch a glimpse of Truth.